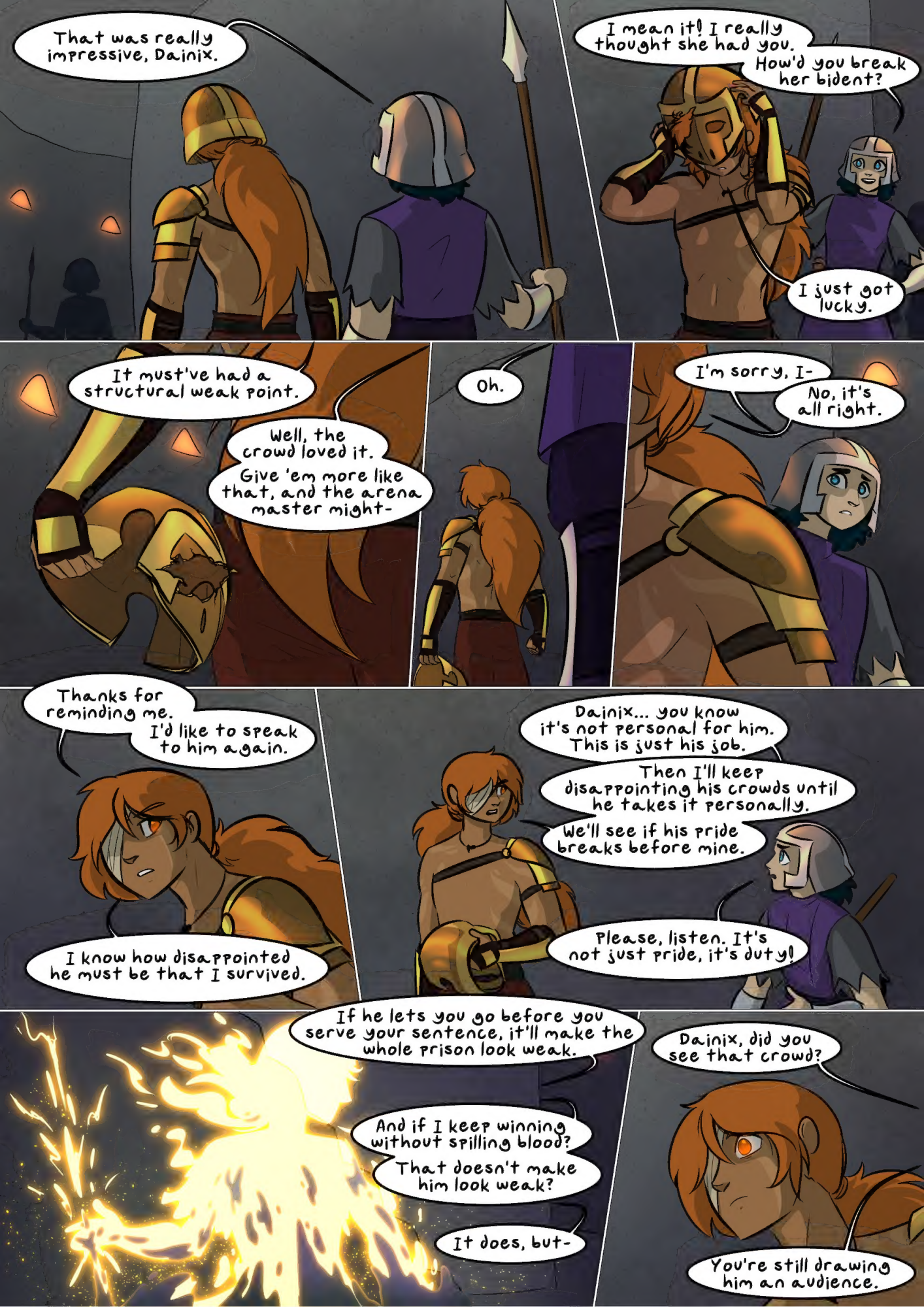
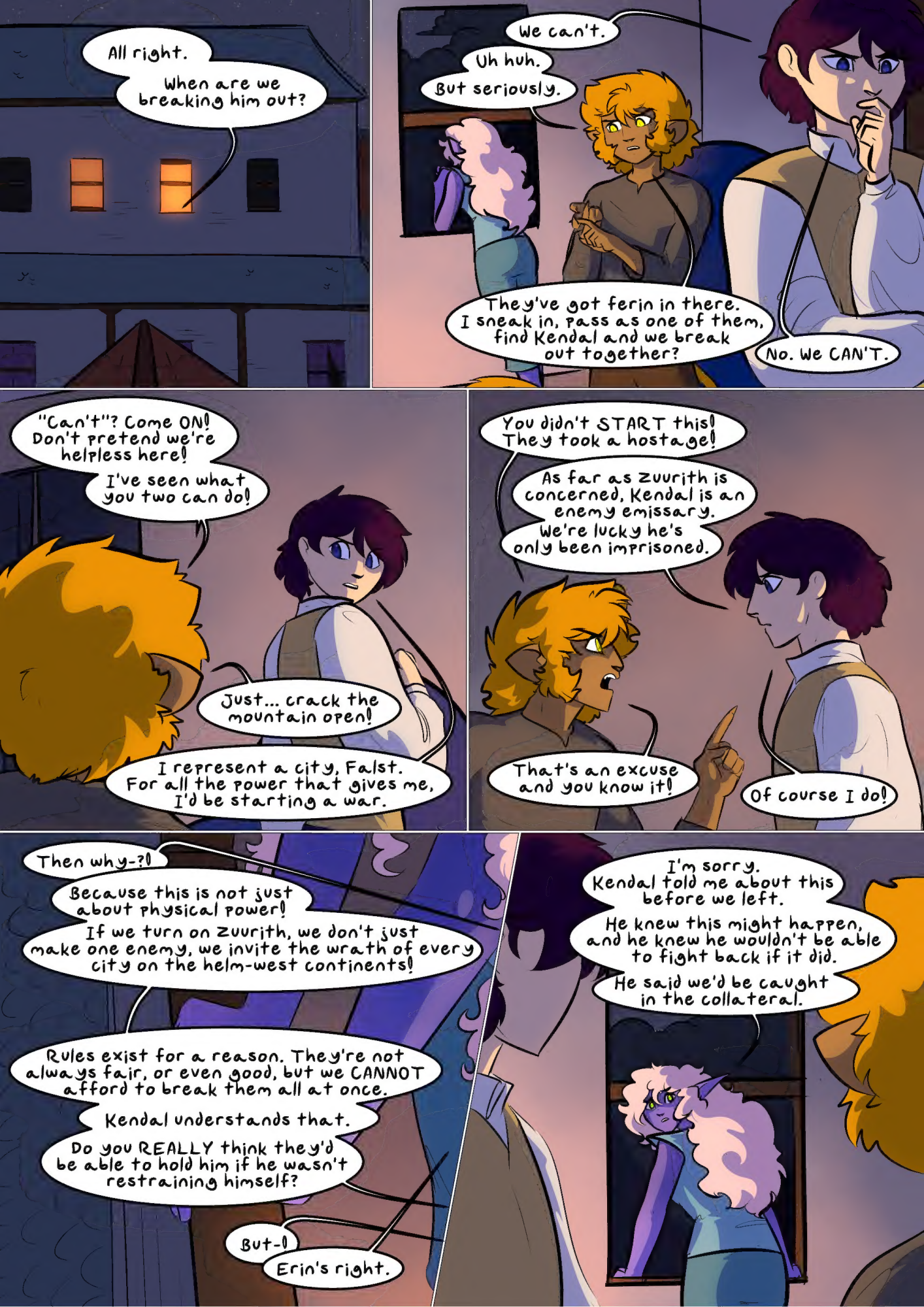
Chapter 13
Long Night

Fan out and keep your eyes open!
And remember, they might be a lightning mage! Use caution, and watch for lights!
Yes, Captain!
'Scuse me.
AH!
Hi, sorry. I'm new in town and didn't know who to talk to about this-
Uh- miss, you can't be out here right now!
We're apprehending a trespassing rogue mage, it could be very dangerous!
Oh.
Well, that's awkward.
What?
Nothing. Have you been watching the sky?

Excuse me?
It's on the horizon, so it's hard to see behind the buildings down here.
There's a storm, but it's not moving right.
And it doesn't feel right, either.
I think you guys might be in trouble.
I FOUND HER! SHE'S OVER HERE!
Aw, really?
CRACK
Tell your boss what I said, okay?
I'm worried about you guys!
STOP!
Get some people in higher vantage points.
And send a message to Shrike. We might need her hunters for this one.


That was really impressive, Dainix.
I mean it! I really thought she had you.
How'd you break her bident?
I just got lucky.
It must've had a structural weak point.
Well, the crowd loved it.
Give 'em more like that, and the arena master might-
Oh.
I'm sorry, I-
No, it's all right.
Thanks for reminding me.
I'd like to speak to him again.
I know how disappointed he must be that I survived.
Dainix... you know it's not personal for him. This is just his job.
Then I'll keep disappointing his crowds until he takes it personally.
We'll see if his pride breaks before mine.
Please, listen. It's not just pride, it's duty!
If he lets you go before you serve your sentence, it'll make the whole prison look weak.
And if I keep winning without spilling blood?
That doesn't make him look weak?
It does, but-
Dainix, did you see that crowd?
You're still drawing him an audience.

It's not so bad, though, right?
At this rate, you'll be out in less than a year.
And ex-gladiators have it really good in this city. You'll be aristocracy!
I won't be staying.
I guess I can't blame you.
You haven't exactly seen our good side here.
No, it's - I'm not holding a grudge.
I mean, I AM, but that's not why I have to leave.
I just... have obligations.
To my people.
You'll see them again.
...I hope so.
And until then, you-
Hey!
Zuurith just took in some high-profile political prisoner.
I don't know the details, and he won't be here long -
But apparently he's too dangerous to put with the general population.
Sorry, Champion, orders from the top.
You've got a cellmate.


All right.
When are we breaking him out?
We can't.
Uh huh.
But seriously.
They've got ferin in there. I sneak in, pass as one of them, find Kendal and we break out together?
No. We CAN'T.
"Can't"? Come ON! Don't pretend we're helpless here!
I've seen what you two can do!
Just... crack the mountain open!
I represent a city, Falst. For all the power that gives me, I'd be starting a war.
You didn't START this! They took a hostage!
As far as Zuurith is concerned, Kendal is an enemy emissary. We're lucky he's only been imprisoned.
That's an excuse and you know it!
Of course I do!
Then why-?!
Because this is not just about physical power!
If we turn on Zuurith, we don't just make one enemy, we invite the wrath of every city on the helm-west continents!
Rules exist for a reason. They're not always fair, or even good, but we CANNOT afford to break them all at once.
Kendal understands that.
Do you REALLY think they'd be able to hold him if he wasn't restraining himself?
But-!
Erin's right.
I'm sorry. Kendal told me about this before we left.
He knew this might happen, and he knew he wouldn't be able to fight back if it did.
He said we'd be caught in the collateral.

Collateral?
And of course he didn't tell me. Why would he?
Wait.
Are WE hostages?!
Probably for the purposes of keeping Kendal in line, yes.
Okay, so we're leaving.
Right now.
Right?
Erin. TELL me we're leaving.
I'm with Falst on this one. They're only holding him while we're in the city, right?
...I'll be as quick as I can.
But we can't leave until I learn what I need to know.
I can't believe you.
They won't even let you in!
I don't like this any more than you do!
But finding a way to stop The Dragon is bigger than ANY of us!
Kendal understands that!
He knew the risks better than any of us, and he STILL told me to pursue this.
If I give up now, that act will have been for nothing!

If you give up now, he walks free in five minutes.
You think he wouldn't want that?
He wouldn't want me to give up on my only lead!
Stop it!
Stop SPEAKING for him!
Of COURSE he'd sacrifice himself for any of us, but that doesn't mean he SHOULD!
...It's been a long day, and I'm going to need to be very diplomatic tomorrow.
We should get some rest.
Uh huh.

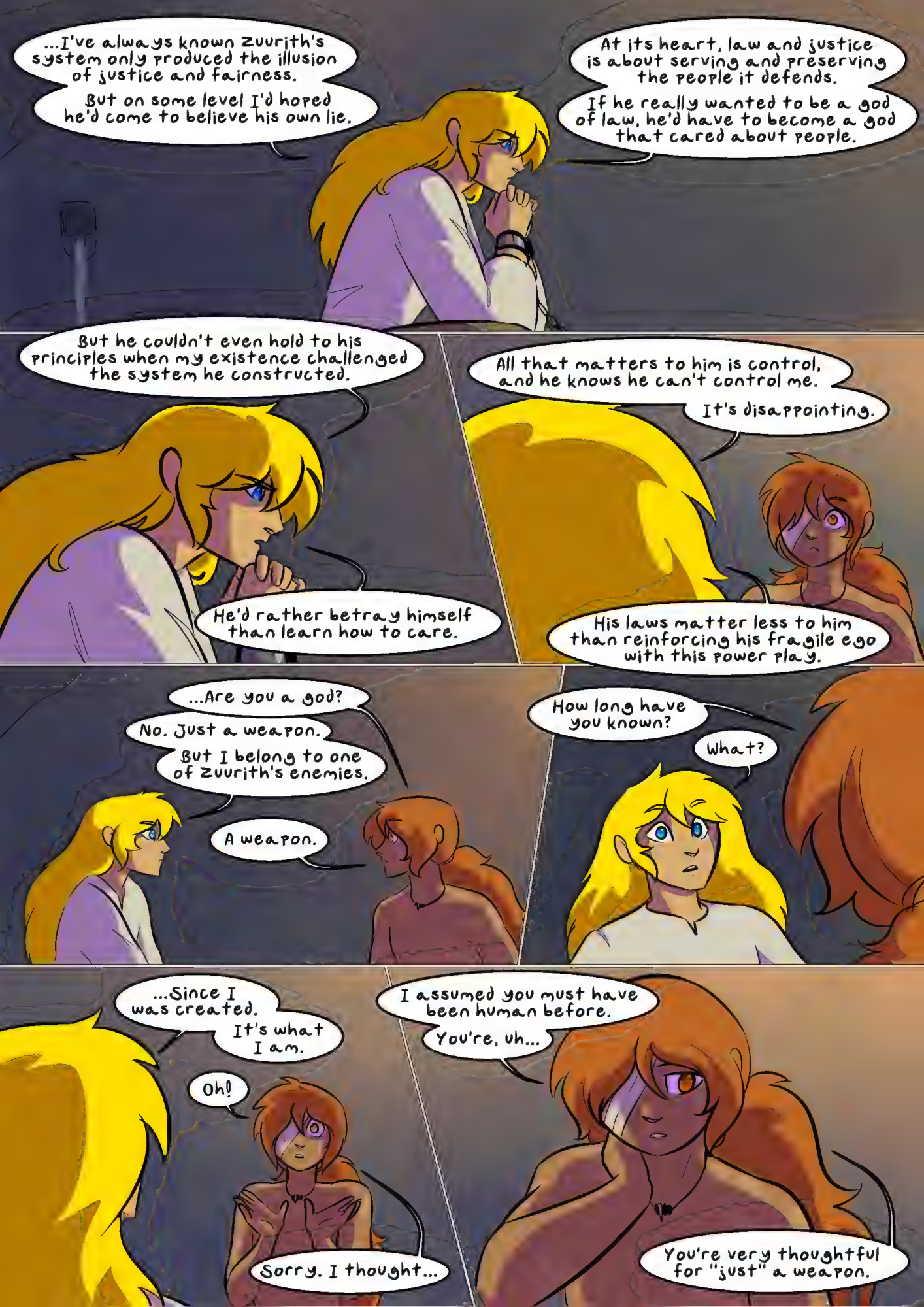
"Trust that I will handle this."
He's his own person.
He knows what he's doing.
It's only a few days.
But it's not the first time he's gotten in over his head.
Has he only made it this far because I keep saving him from the consequences?
If I leave him like he asked-
RRRRGH
why does he keep DOING this
Son of a-
FALST!

Oh, you're coming! Great!
But keep your voice down, Erin might hear.
I'm NOT-
gah!
SKEE
I'm not coming with you!
I'm STOPPING you!
I think you're gonna need to make that jump first.
!!!
I'll be honest, I don't really see this working out too well for you.
No dirt, no plants.
Come back!
No thanks.
If Erin wants to sacrifice his friends for some "greater good", he'd better get used to disappointment.
Good thing he's a fast learner.
No - listen!
Kendal can't hide from gods!
He's like a beacon to them! It's why he knew this was coming!
Even if we get him out, he'll have nowhere to hide!

Then this time they'll have to go through us.
Falst-!
GNNNH

Huh.
Busy night.
So...
This is probably a little weird for both of us.

It is.
I'm sorry for intruding.
Don't take this the wrong way, but you don't really strike me as the massive security risk the guards think you are.
I won't hurt you.
I wasn't expecting you to.
You just apologized for being imprisoned inconveniently.
But... and again, don't take this the wrong way...
You're... not as human as you look, right?
...No.
Ah, I'm sorry.
Touchy subject. I get it.
You do?
Uh... in a way.
Sorry for prying. I know it's a weird question, it's just... it's the only explanation I can think of.
The arenamaster doesn't disrupt his system for anyone. He's stubborn that way.
But you - they're breaking all the rules just to keep you here for a few days at most.
I've been trying to work my way out of this place for sindahlans now, so I know there's nothing you could've DONE that'd get them this riled up.
And if it's nothing you DID, it has to be something about who you ARE.
Something unprecedented they don't know how to handle.
Something big enough it'd make a prison break its own laws.
Right?


...I've always known Zuurith's system only produced the illusion of justice and fairness.
But on some level I'd hoped he'd come to believe his own lie.
At its heart, law and justice is about serving and preserving the people it defends.
If he really wanted to be a god of law, he'd have to become a god that cared about people.
But he couldn't even hold to his principles when my existence challenged the system he constructed.
He'd rather betray himself than learn how to care.
All that matters to him is control, and he knows he can't control me.
It's disappointing.
His laws matter less to him than reinforcing his fragile ego with this power play.
...Are you a god?
No. Just a weapon.
But I belong to one of Zuurith's enemies.
A weapon.
How long have you known?
What?
...Since I was created.
It's what I am.
Oh!
Sorry. I thought...
I assumed you must have been human before.
You're, uh...
You're very thoughtful for "just" a weapon.

Could you... break out of here?
CRACK
SPANG
Probably.
But if I do, people will get hurt, and I can't let that happen.
I'm sorry I can't help you.
No, that - that wasn't why I was asking.
I get it. Really.
It's not the walls that keep you in.

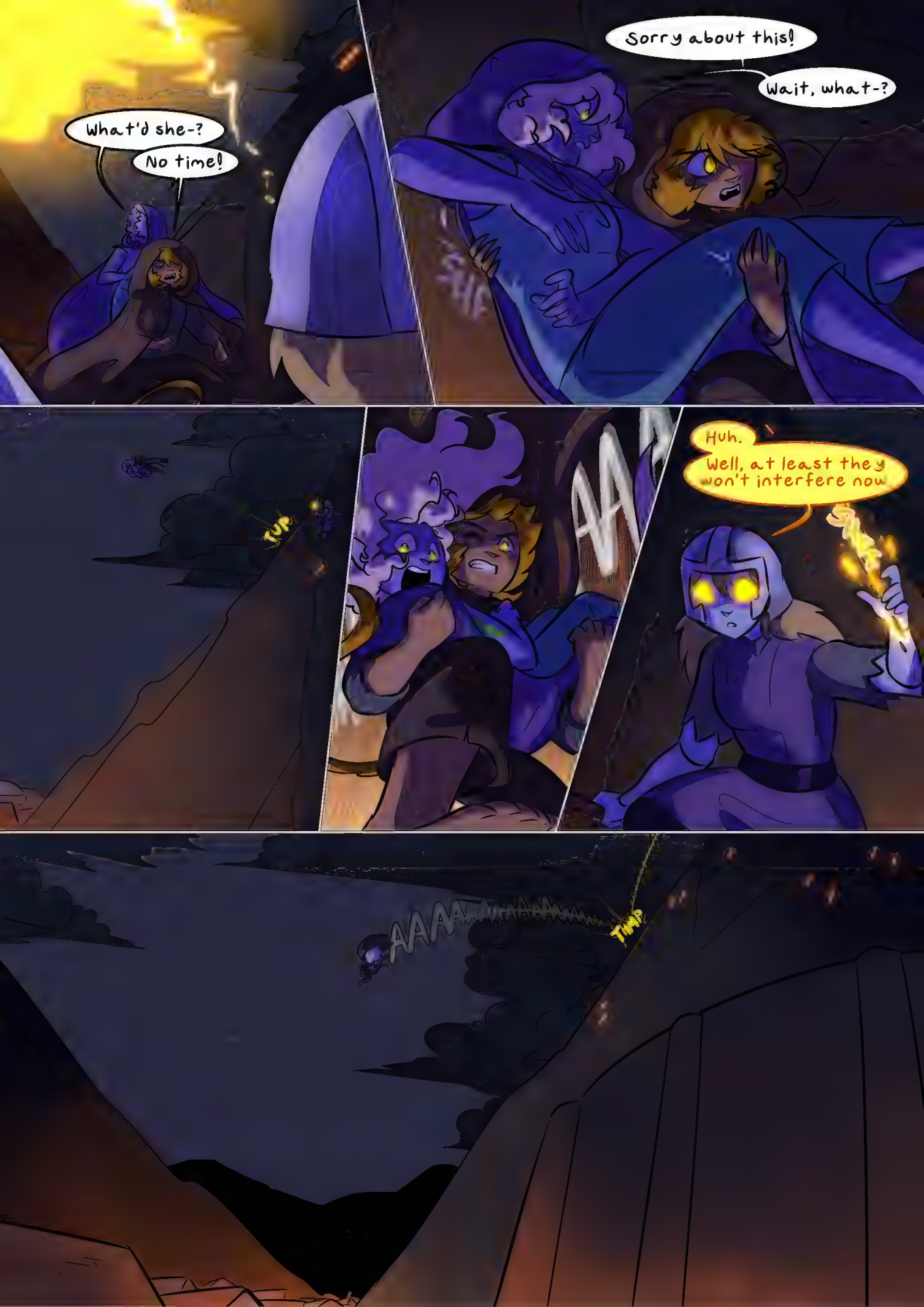
No security.
They wouldn't keep him here.
CRK
CRK

WHEEZ
Oops.
This isn't going to help!
Doing nothing isn't going to help him either!
That doesn't make THIS a good idea!
At least I'm TRYING!
Look at this place! There could be a third of the city crammed in there!
It's not right!
You think I don't know that?!
Then DO something about it!
I can't do a TENTH of what you and Erin could do here!
Why am I the only one trying?!
And if I did break the whole place open, what then?
These people spill out into a city that's utterly hostile to them!
What good would my power do then?
This prison is just the symptom of a problem I have no idea how to fix!
I don't know how to heal a broken society!
Do you?

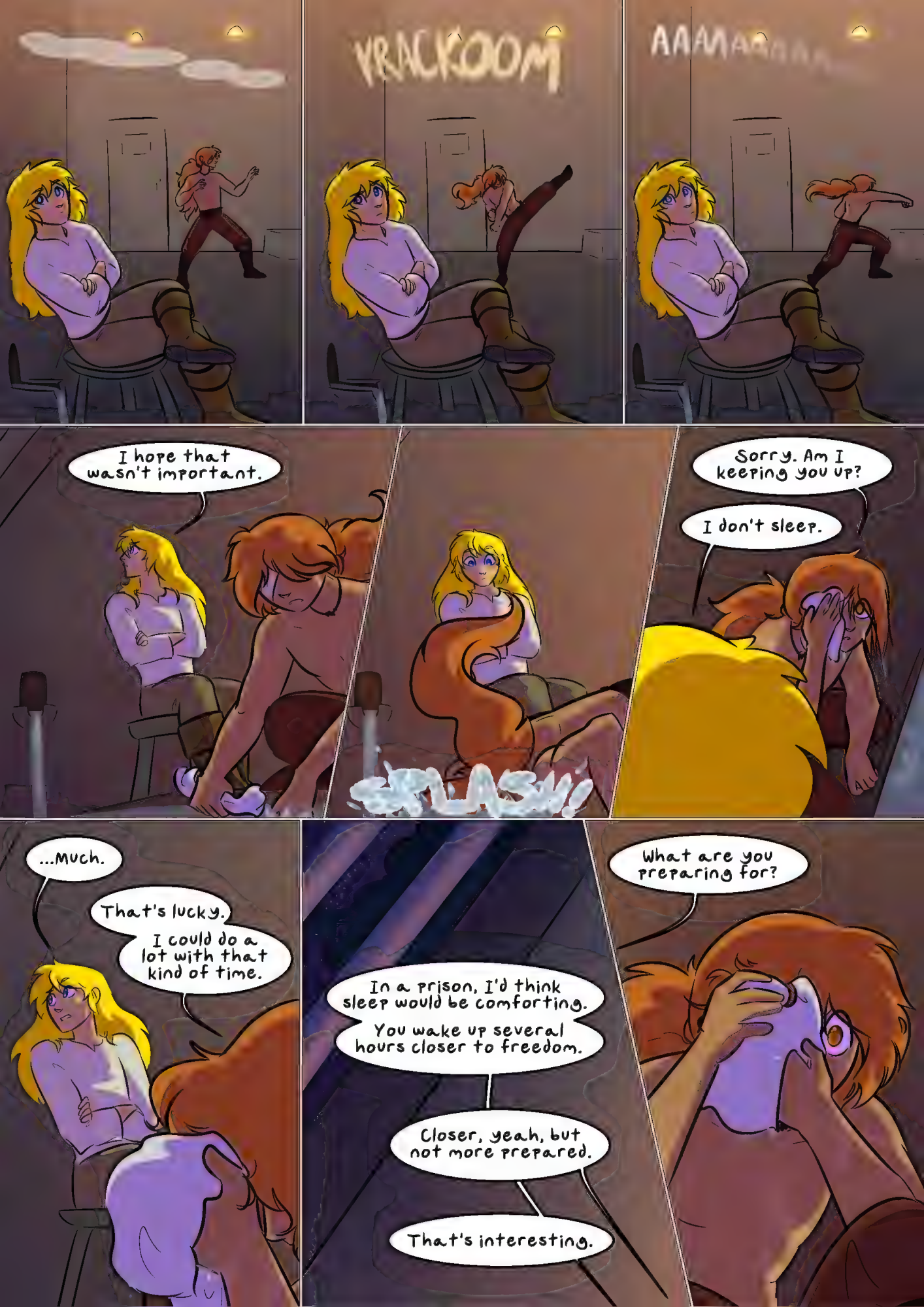
I hate this.
I know.
They're not strong enough to overpower us.
They've just twisted the rules so we can't fight back.
FLUMP
Rules. Yeah. This place is so... structured.
But it all feels so fragile, like we're disrupting it just by being here.
It'd be too easy to break something or hurt someone.
I wonder how Erin stands it.
Are you kidding? He's having the time of his life.
Being able to sling fireballs around is just a bonus for him.
You think he'd still be that smug if people could punch him whenever he deserved it?
Places like this exist for people like him.
You, me, Kendal... we're not protected here. We're what the rules are supposed to keep out.
You could be right.
I can't use my magic without breaking things. Pavement, buildings... there's no room to grow.
I don't feel alienated here, but I do feel... restricted.
But if they try to keep Kendal in there a second longer than necessary -
I'm tearing this place down stone by stone.

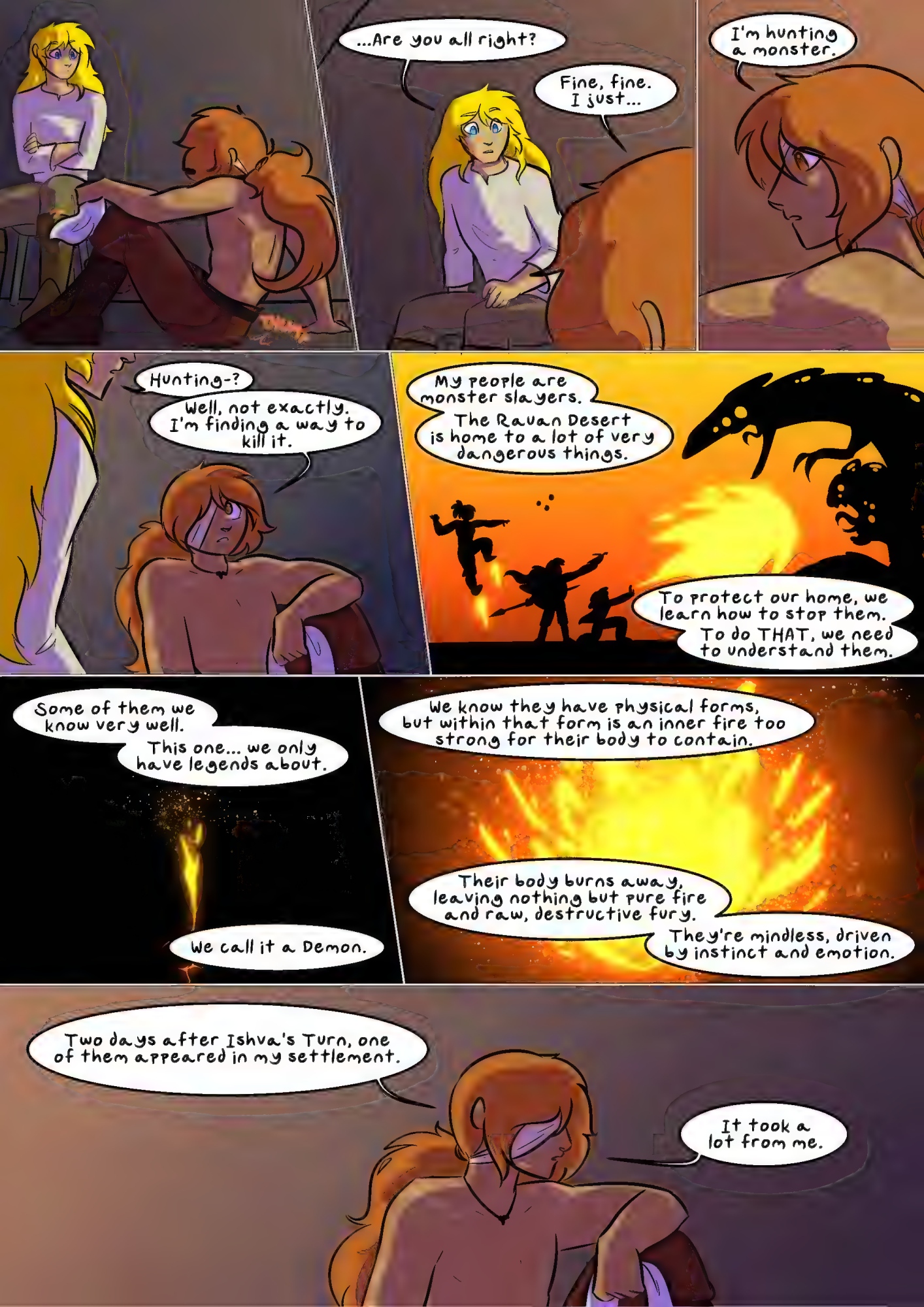
I know, right?
City people get mad about the weirdest things.
AH!
Gh-!
Whoa!
Hey, hey, easy!
We're all breaking the rules here.
Didn't mean to startle you.
Who ARE you?
Call me Tess.
Sorry about the intrusion, I didn't mean to eavesdrop.
I just needed a better vantage point.
But did I hear you say "Erin"?
It's a long shot, but did you mean the same Erin who's the Aseran elemental mage?
Oh, we-
Don't say anything!
She was looking for him back in the valley, too.
What do you want with him?

Wait.
Have... you two met?
OH!
The little guy from the river!
Little-?!
Glad you're all right!
What?
But look, if you know where Erin is, you have to tell me.
Oh yeah? Why?
Because of that!
HEY!
You can't be up here!
WE HAVE INTRUDERS!
Oh, well, not THAT. It's another-
You know what, never mind.
KOOM

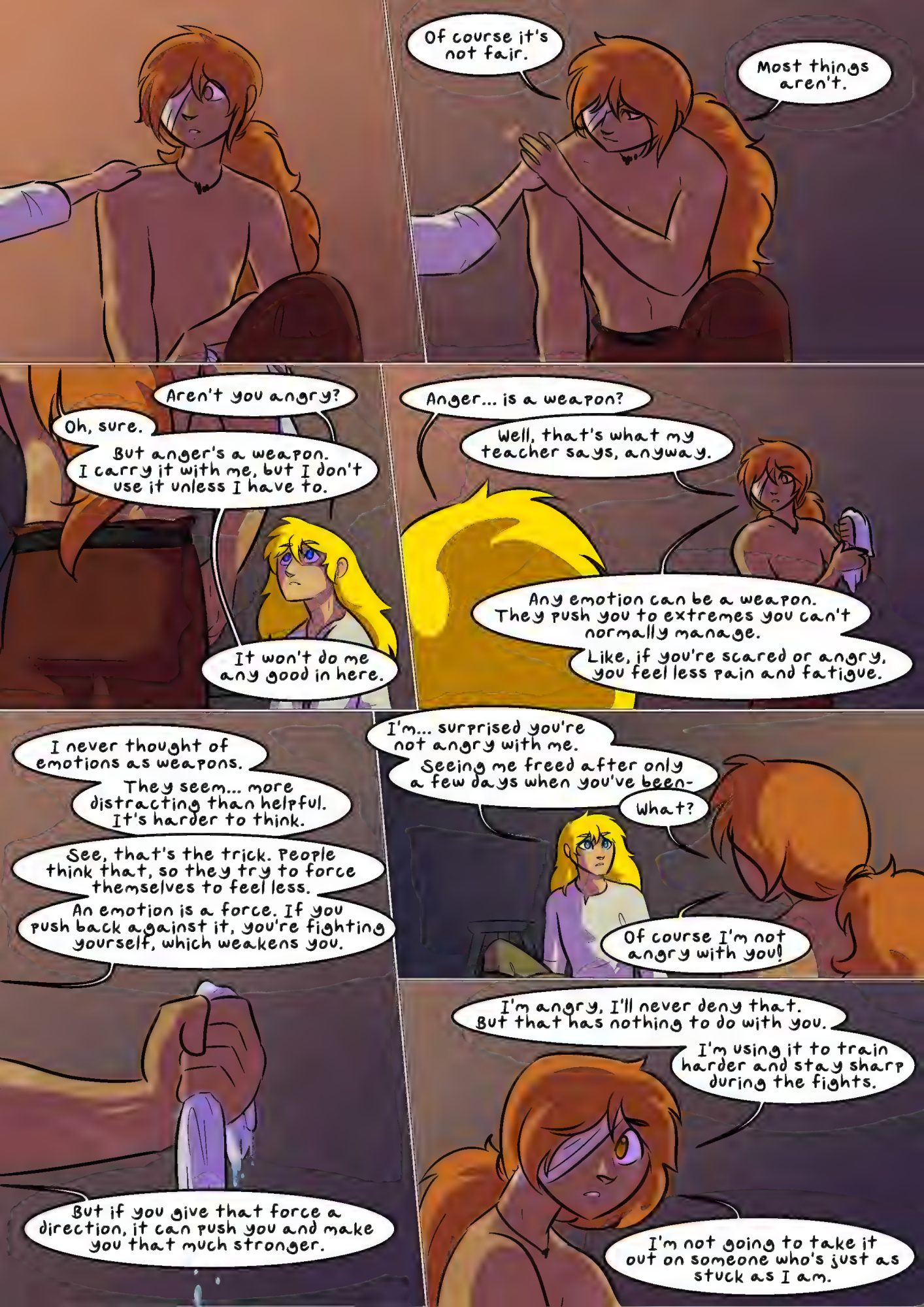

What'd she-?
No time!
Sorry about this!
Wait, what-?
TUP
Huh.
Well, at least they won't interfere now
AAAA

NAAAAAAA
SMASH
...
a... alinva?
Ahh.
Come on, we have to move. That landing wasn't exactly quiet.
Okay, that was quick thinking, but please NEVER do that again.
What?
You're a healer and I'm really hard to hurt.
This was the fastest way down.
I understand your logic but do you know how many of your BONES I just FIXED


KRACKOOM
AAAAAAAAA
I hope that wasn't important.
Sorry. Am I keeping you up?
I don't sleep.
SPLASH!
...much.
That's lucky.
I could do a lot with that kind of time.
In a prison, I'd think sleep would be comforting.
You wake up several hours closer to freedom.
Closer, yeah, but not more prepared.
That's interesting.
What are you preparing for?

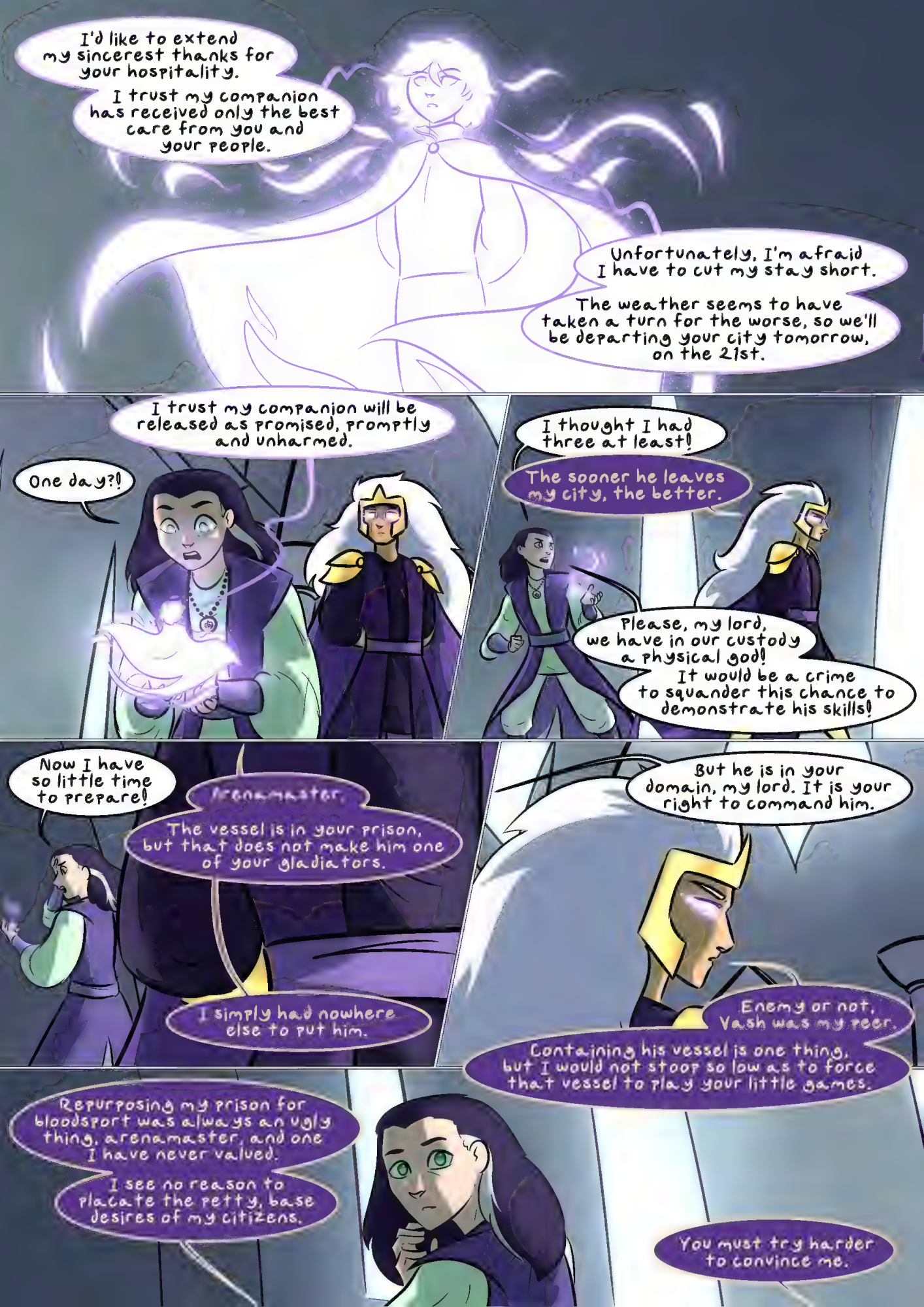

...Are you all right?
Fine, fine. I just...
I'm hunting a monster.
Hunting-?
Well, not exactly. I'm finding a way to kill it.
My people are monster slayers.
The Ravan Desert is home to a lot of very dangerous things.
To protect our home, we learn how to stop them.
To do THAT, we need to understand them.
Some of them we know very well.
This one... we only have legends about.
We call it a Demon.
We know they have physical forms, but within that form is an inner fire too strong for their body to contain.
Their body burns away, leaving nothing but pure fire and raw, destructive fury.
They're mindless, driven by instinct and emotion.
Two days after Ishva's Turn, one of them appeared in my settlement.
It took a lot from me.

Eventually it burned itself out.
In the aftermath, we realized how little we understood it. How lucky we were to have survived at all.
But someone out there had to know what it was and what it could do.
I was sent out to find that information and bring it back.
And then I camped too close to Zuurith, got attacked by bandits and scooped up by the patrolling guards.
Not bad for my first trip out of the desert, right?
That's-
And as far as Zuurith is concerned, I'm as godless as those bandits.
Nobody here knows what a Demon is, and they don't really care that I have more important things to do than fight for their entertainment.
But at the same time, it's given me time to prepare.
Really, it's almost a win-win scenario, right?
Either I annoy the arenamaster enough that he kicks me out early, or I fight through my sentence and learn more discipline and hand-to-hand combat in a year than I'd picked up in two decades.
Either way I get something I need.
I'm so sorry.
Nothing about that is fair.


Of course it's not fair.
Most things aren't.
Aren't you angry?
Oh, sure.
But anger's a weapon. I carry it with me, but I don't use it unless I have to.
It won't do me any good in here.
Anger... is a weapon?
Well, that's what my teacher says, anyway.
Any emotion can be a weapon. They push you to extremes you can't normally manage.
Like, if you're scared or angry, you feel less pain and fatigue.
I never thought of emotions as weapons.
They seem... more distracting than helpful. It's harder to think.
See, that's the trick. People think that, so they try to force themselves to feel less.
An emotion is a force. If you push back against it, you're fighting yourself, which weakens you.
But if you give that force a direction, it can push you and make you that much stronger.
I'm... surprised you're not angry with me.
Seeing me freed after only a few days when you've been-
What?
Of course I'm not angry with you!
I'm angry, I'll never deny that. But that has nothing to do with you.
I'm using it to train harder and stay sharp during the fights.
I'm not going to take it out on someone who's just as stuck as I am.

Should we tell Erin?
Evening.
Probably in the morning.
Weird metal women aren't really his highest priority right now.
Time and again, he walks into the jaws of death for you.

He didn't tell me this was dangerous for him.
I didn't ask him to make any sacrifices for me.
And he will never ask you to save him.
How can he, when he does not believe himself truly alive?
That's not my fault or my responsibility.
Stopping you is more important.
Of course.
I am the center of your world.
And a very convenient excuse.
You have always let others suffer for your convenience, so long as they do it quietly.
I have changed nothing of your nature.
Or have you forgotten what-?
I was a CHILD! POWERLESS!
And now?
You're trying to distract me.
Please.
I'm not ex


I'd like to extend my sincerest thanks for your hospitality.
I trust my companion has received only the best care from you and your people.
Unfortunately, I'm afraid I have to cut my stay short.
The weather seems to have taken a turn for the worse, so we'll be departing your city tomorrow, on the 21st.
I trust my companion will be released as promised, promptly and unharmed.
One day?!
I thought I had three at least!
The sooner he leaves my city, the better.
Please, my lord, we have in our custody a physical god! It would be a crime to squander this chance to demonstrate his skills!
Now I have so little time to prepare!
Arenamaster.
The vessel is in your prison, but that does not make him one of your gladiators.
I simply had nowhere else to put him.
But he is in your domain, my lord. It is your right to command him.
Enemy or not, Vash was my peer.
Containing his vessel is one thing, but I would not stoop so low as to force that vessel to play your little games.
Repurposing my prison for bloodsport was always an ugly thing, arenamaster, and one I have never valued.
I see no reason to placate the petty, base desires of my citizens.
You must try harder to convince me.

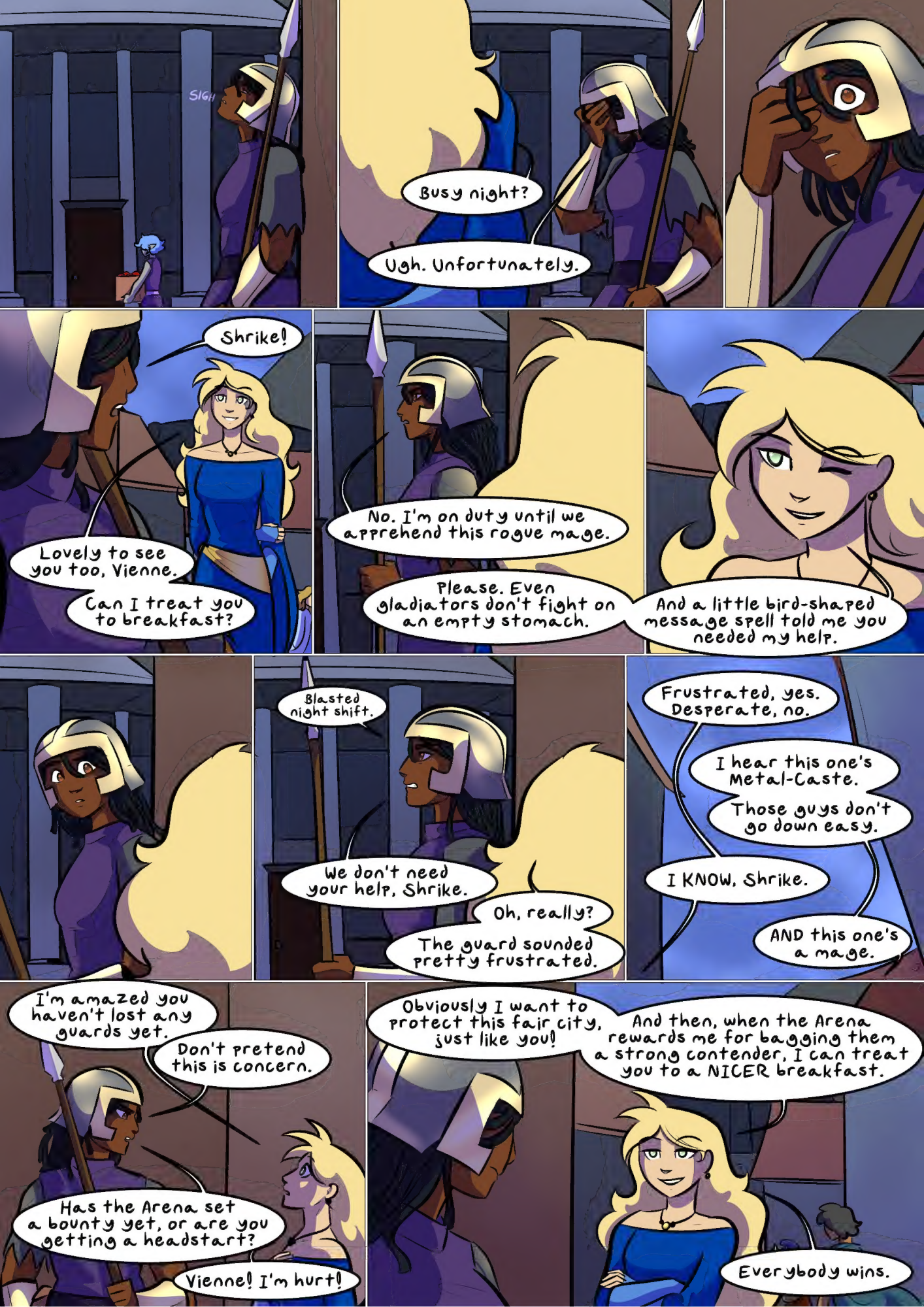
My lord, you know better than anyone that a system that functions perfectly on paper often falters when mortals attempt to implement it.
We are flawed and fallible, and sometimes a single person can disrupt an otherwise flawless system.
As your emissaries, it is our duty to ensure that your governance is effectively implemented in spite of those disruptions.
Your will and guidance have never failed us, but we have at times failed you.
We constantly work to preserve your perfect order against an onslaught of a thousand disruptions.
Your point, arenamaster?
The arena has a problem I have thus far been unable to resolve.
The Ignan champion demands an early release, which obviously cannot be done.
In protest, he adamantly refuses to fight seriously. He has killed no-one, and has not even maimed.
He has broken no rules, and thus I cannot directly retaliate, but while he does not strictly defy your system, he makes a mockery of it.
It makes me appear weak, and to my shame, that in turn reflects poorly on you.
If he stays, he makes us look weak, but if I remove him, we betray our own principles.
I believe we have a unique opportunity to resolve this issue without in any way subverting your authority.
Unless he is ousted in combat, he will continue to diminish us until his sentence is served.
After all, the vessel is strong-
And his actions are not your responsibility.

The head archivist isn't in yet, but I can start yelling if you want a headstart.
I want to apologize.
I thought this archive worked like the research facilities I was familiar with.
When I learned I was wrong, I acted... unreasonably.
I was caught up in my own stubborn pride, and I lost sight of my actual goal.
What would I have to do to gain access to the archives for one day?
Well, this is different.
Please, just tell me if it's possible.
You're actually going to listen to me this time?
Of course.
All right.
Here's how this works.

The Archive wasn't built with public access in mind.
Its only purpose is to serve as a repository of knowledge for generations of Paladins.
Some of the books here are relatively new and sturdy, but a lot of them are extremely old and fragile.
Most of the original records are diaries written with substances that weren't made to last.
One of my jobs is to copy those deteriorating texts into new, durable volumes that'll last longer.
I see. Hand-copying the text lets the information survive past the physical limits of any one record.
Exactly.
The Archive exists to preserve and protect that knowledge, but that means we can't open it for public access.
It's a bit of a contradiction, but the most damaging thing you can do to a book is to let people read it.
All this knowledge, and nobody ever gets to see it.
I can't decide if that's a tragedy or a crime.
Calm down. It's not that dramatic.
I have access to the archives, and I know which books are safe to read and which ones are too fragile to touch.
If I personally vouch for you and supervise your research, I can get you limited access to the archives.
So, tell me-
Why should I do that?

I understand.
After how I acted yesterday-
No, I mean literally.
Why do you want this so badly?
Excuse me?
I'm serious.
Even the Paladins that come here usually just look up one or two references.
Nobody asks for the whole archive.
Some hotshot Aseran mage swings into town and says he wants to look at everything we have?
Even I know the Aseran Academy doesn't think too highly of the Paladins.
And then you apologized, which is honestly weirder.
I can tell you really want this, but I need to know why.
All right.
Your ultimate enemy? The Black Dragon?
The Academy doesn't think he's real.
I'm going to prove them wrong.

So this is an academic pride thing?
Exactly.
Nobody else believes in these Dragon figures, and the Academy dismisses them as superstition.
I'm trying to educate myself, but it's difficult when the information I need is so diligently guarded.
The Academy has its biases, but it taught me to always seek the source.
For documentation on the Void Dragon, there's no better place to start my research.
You don't touch any books I don't personally give to you.
You wear gloves if I tell you to.
And so help me, you do NOT bring food or drinks in with you.
Got it?
Got it.
Thank you very much.


SIGH
Busy night?
Ugh. Unfortunately.
Shrike!
Lovely to see you too, Vienne.
Can I treat you to breakfast?
No. I'm on duty until we apprehend this rogue mage.
Please. Even gladiators don't fight on an empty stomach.
And a little bird-shaped message spell told me you needed my help.
Blasted night shift.
We don't need your help, Shrike.
Oh, really?
The guard sounded pretty frustrated.
Frustrated, yes. Desperate, no.
I hear this one's Metal-Caste.
Those guys don't go down easy.
I KNOW, Shrike.
AND this one's a mage.
I'm amazed you haven't lost any guards yet.
Don't pretend this is concern.
Has the Arena set a bounty yet, or are you getting a headstart?
Vienne! I'm hurt!
Obviously I want to protect this fair city, just like you!
And then, when the Arena rewards me for bagging them a strong contender, I can treat you to a NICER breakfast.
Everybody wins.

SIGH
It's not just the metal-caste.
There was a disturbance on the mountain last night.
Oho!
Nobody got a good look, but one of the trespassers JUMPED off the peak. All the way down.
We didn't find a body, so they must've been able to walk it off.
The boys are going to love this.
Could you at least pretend to take this seriously?
Oh, believe me, I am.
Anything else?
No.
A metal-caste lightning mage and someone who tanked a fall off the peak.
Very nice.
There may have been a third trespasser on the peak, but we don't have a description.
That's fine. We'll cast a wide net.
Make DEAD sure it's really them.
I know the Arena isn't picky.
I won't have you clapping irons on the first ferin you find.
Get some rest, Vienne.
We'll sort this out.